

# Contacts between Anchorage Adults and Police

Brad A. Myrstol

As recent events in places like Ferguson, Missouri have shown, the frequency and nature of face-to-face contacts between the police and members of the public are critical factors impacting police–community relations. This article presents selected results from a pilot study of police–citizen contacts that was conducted in Anchorage, Alaska in 2013.

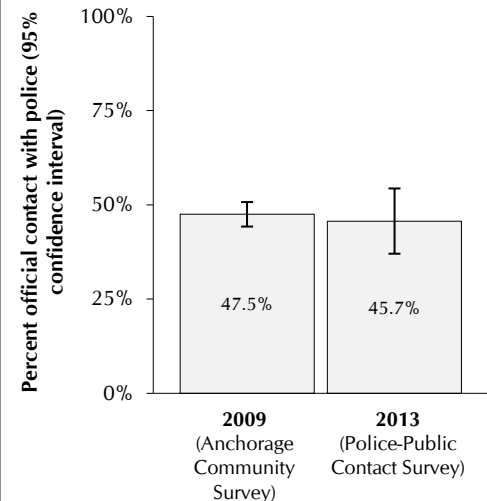
In spring 2013 the Alaska Justice Statistical Analysis Center (AJSAC), which is located in the UAA Justice Center, conducted the *Alaska Police–Public Contact Survey: Phase I Pilot* (hereafter, Phase I Pilot). The primary objectives of the Phase I Pilot were (a) to assess the feasibility of using a mail-based, self-administered survey methodology to produce valid and reliable estimates of the frequency with which adult residents had face-to-face contacts with police in the past year, and (b) to collect information pertaining to the nature of police–public contacts and the outcome of those contacts. The survey instrument that was used for the Alaska

Phase I Pilot was the Police–Public Contact Survey (2008) questionnaire developed by the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. (To learn more about this ongoing study, see: <http://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=dcdetail&iid=251>.)

The overarching goals of the AJSAC’s effort to establish an Alaska-specific police–public contact survey are (a) to provide the public, as well as policymakers and practitioners, with detailed information about the nature and characteristics of police–public encounters, including the reason the contact occurred and the outcome of the contact, and (b) to collect this information using an established, validated survey instrument that will allow for direct comparison with national police–public contact estimates.

Data collection for the study was conducted in May 2013. The Phase I Pilot was limited to adult residents

**Figure 1. Percentage of Anchorage Adults Who Made Official Contact with Police in the Past 12 Months, 2009 and 2013**



Source of data: Anchorage Community Survey 2009 and Alaska Police-Public Contact Survey Phase I Pilot



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## Notes on the Phase I Pilot Methodology

**Sampling.** Data collection for the *Alaska Police–Public Contact Survey: Phase I Pilot* was conducted in May 2013. The Phase I Pilot was limited to adult residents of Anchorage and began with a randomly selected sample of 906 residential households. Questionnaires were addressed to an *adult resident* of each household.

A five-stage mailing protocol was used, consisting of the following: (1) an introductory letter, (2) a detailed study introduction letter, informed consent form, and a questionnaire with postage-paid, pre-addressed return envelope, (3 and 4) reminder postcards, and (5) a reminder letter and study description, informed consent form, and a questionnaire with postage-paid, pre-addressed return envelope. Each mailing occurred approximately 7 to 10 days following the previous mailing. Potential respondents were not provided any monetary incentives or payment for their participation in the Phase I Pilot. Sample members could withdraw their participation at any time by contacting the study director via phone or email, or by returning a blank questionnaire in the postage-paid, pre-addressed envelope.

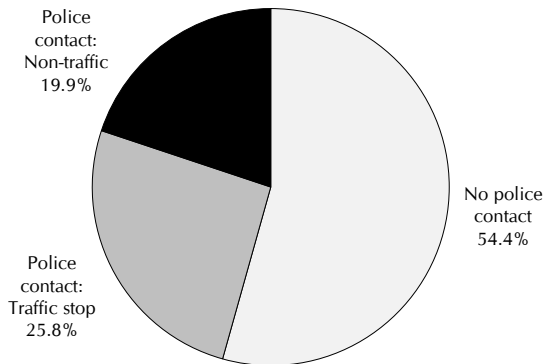
A total of 201 questionnaires were completed and returned for an overall sur-

vey response rate of 22.2 percent. In all, the Phase I Pilot questionnaire included 74 individual response items divided into three sections: an introductory section, a traffic stop encounters section, and a non-traffic stop encounters section. When all of the possible responses for each item for each respondent were analyzed (a total of more than 2,850 possible item responses for the entire sample), missing and/or invalid values were found in 155 instances, making the overall item non-response rate of just over 5 percent.

**Sample Weighting.** A *base weight* equal to the reciprocal of the probability of selection for each household was calculated for each returned questionnaire. This base weight was then adjusted for *unit non-response* and *unequal probability of selection* for households with multiple adult residents. Finally, *post-stratification* procedures were performed to correct for non-coverage bias, which occurs when the sampling procedures used fail to capture all members of the population of interest. The survey weights were post-stratified to adult population totals for age, race, and gender using 2011 one-year population estimates obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey.

**Figure 2. Official Contact with Police by Anchorage Adults in Past 12 Months, 2013**

"During the last 12 months, did you have any face-to-face contact with a police officer?"

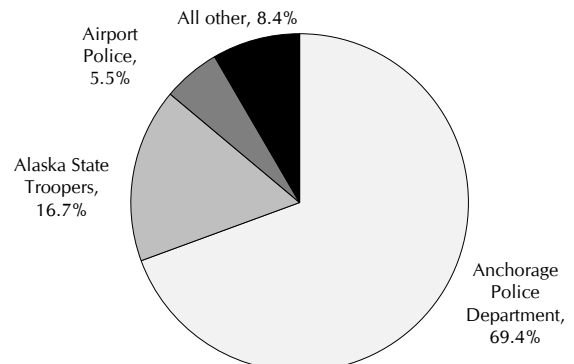


Note: Respondents were asked to exclude telephone contacts, contacts with private security guards, police officers they see socially, and any contacts with police officer relatives. Routine police contacts occurring because of a respondent's employment or volunteer work were also excluded.

Source of data: Alaska Police-Public Contact Survey Phase I Pilot

**Figure 3. Distribution of Traffic Stop Contacts in Anchorage, by Police Agency, 2013**

"What agency/department did the officer(s) that stopped the vehicle work for?"



Source of data: Alaska Police-Public Contact Survey Phase I Pilot

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The findings presented below were derived using *weighted data*. Sample weights were constructed to correct for imperfections in the sampling protocol and resulting sampling bias. This data represents responses regarding contact with *any* police officer—this includes the Anchorage Police Department, Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport Police, Alaska State Troopers, and other agencies.

**Preliminary Findings**

An estimated 45.7 percent of Anchorage adults had at least one face-to-face contact with a police officer within the 12-month period immediately preceding the Phase I Pilot. This estimate is consistent with findings from the most recent (2009) iteration of the Anchorage Community Survey, which found that an estimated 47.5 percent of Anchorage adults made official contact with police in the preceding year (Figure 1).

lot results show that among those with at least one face-to-face contact with a police officer, 65.8 percent reported a single contact, 17.1 percent reported two contacts, 6.1 percent had 3 to 5 contacts, and 3.7 percent reported more than 5 face-to-face contacts with police in the preceding year. (Of the respondents who indicated at least *one* face-to-face contact with police in the preceding year, 7.3% did not report how many police contacts they had in total.)

**Traffic Stops**

Slightly more than a quarter of Anchorage adults (25.8%) reported that their *most recent* face-to-face contact with police occurred within the context of a traffic stop (not including contacts related to a traffic accident) (Figure 2). Nearly ninety percent (89.5%) of these individuals indicated that they were the driver of the vehicle that was stopped. Respondents reported that police officers provided respondents with a reason for initiating traffic stops in 94.3 percent of cases. The most commonly reported reason given by police for initiating a traffic stop was speeding (28.1%), followed by illegal turn/lane change (15.6%), headlight out/not turned on (12.5%), stop sign/light violation (9.4%), expired tags (9.4%), a broken tail light (9.4%), or some other reason (15.6%). (Examples of "other" reasons cited by respondents included *being in the wrong part of town*, *fit the description of a suspect*, and *random sobriety/safety check*.) Almost three-quarters (73.5%) of Phase I Pilot Study participants who were subject to a traffic stop reported that they believed that the

police had a legitimate reason for stopping the vehicle.

Nearly 7 out of 10 (69.4%) traffic stop contacts reported by Anchorage adults were with officers employed by the Anchorage Police Department, and roughly 1 out of 6 (16.7%) traffic stop encounters were with Alaska State Troopers. Face-to-face contacts with airport police were reported in 5.5 percent of cases. The remainder (8.4%) consisted of interactions with police from other agencies, including out-of-state police departments (Figure 3).

**Non-Traffic Stop Encounters**

An estimated 19.9 percent of Anchorage adults reported that their *most recent* face-to-face contact with police was in a non-traffic stop situation. The most commonly cited reason for these non-traffic stop encounters was respondents' involvement in, or witnessing of, a *traffic accident*. This reason for face-to-face contact with police was reported by 26.2 percent of those who indicated that their *most recent* contact with a police officer occurred outside the context of a traffic stop. This was followed by the reporting of a crime or some other problem to police (19%), the police providing some sort of assistance or service to the respondent (19%), the police suspected the respondent of something (11.9%), the police were conducting a criminal investigation (7.1%), and miscellaneous "other" reasons (16.7%).

**Searches**

Among those who experienced at least one face-to-face contact with police within the context of a traffic stop in the preceding

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## Police contact

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year, 17.6 percent reported that their *most recent* traffic stop contact with police included a search of the vehicle, and 11.8 percent reported a search of their person—being patted down, frisked, or otherwise searched. Respondents reported that police discovered illegal/prohibited items (such as weapons, drugs, and open containers of alcohol) in a third of all searches of vehicles and persons. Among those who came into contact with police in a *non-traffic* stop situation, 4.7 percent reported being patted down, frisked, or otherwise searched (Figure 4). According to respondents, none of those reported searches resulted in the discovery of illegal items or contraband by police.

### Use of Force by Police

An estimated 8.8 percent of respondents who reported one or more face-to-face contacts with police indicated that the police used or threatened to use force against them. The vast majority of instances in which police were reported to have used or threatened to use force against an individual were limited to verbal conduct. This included shouting at, cursing at, and/or verbally threatening to use force against the respondent. Survey respondents reported the use of all other types of force (ranging from the use of physical force/restraint to the drawing of a service weapon) by police in approximately 14 percent of contacts.

### Summary

The study's results suggest a mail-based questionnaire is a feasible means for obtaining sound empirical estimates of police–public contacts. Even though its sample size was much smaller ( $n=201$ ), the Phase I Pilot estimate of the frequency of police–public contacts (45.7% of the survey sample) very closely approximated the findings of the most recent Anchorage Community Survey (47.5%), which had a much larger sample ( $n=2,080$ ). In addition, detailed analyses of the Phase I Pilot response patterns showed that respondents had little difficulty navigating a paper-based version of the Bureau of Justice Statistics police–public contact survey instrument, with an item non-response rate of just over 5 percent.

With respect to substantive findings beyond the frequency of citizen contacts with police, in general, this article also presented more detailed information related to the situational context of police–public contacts (*traffic stop contacts* and *non-traffic stop contacts*), how often police–public contacts

resulted in *searches* of individuals and vehicles, and the frequency with which police officers *used or threatened to use force* in their interactions with members of the public.

Approximately 1 out of every 4 Anchorage adults (25.8%) reported that their *most recent* contact with police occurred within the context of a *traffic stop*. This figure represents 56.5 percent of all those who had at least one contact with police in the previous year. Nearly 20 percent (19.9%) of Anchorage adults reported that their *most recent* contact with a police officer was in a non-traffic stop situation.

### Limitations of This Study

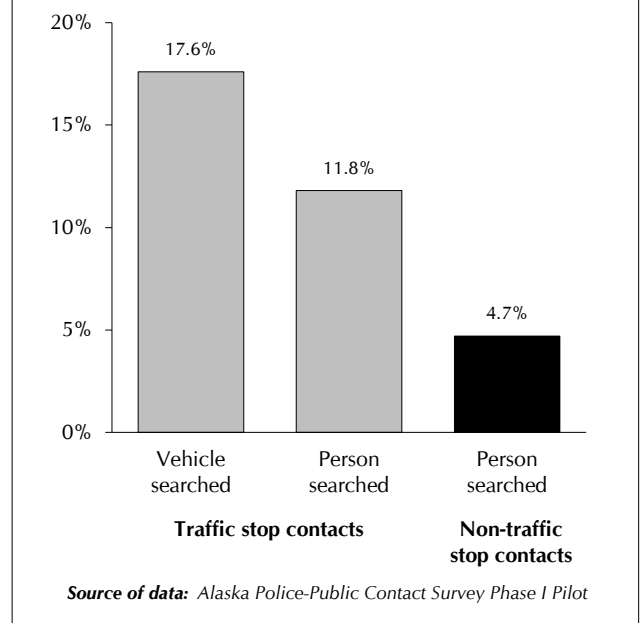
A *pilot* is a small-scale study, the purpose of which is to evaluate and improve upon the methodological design and to assess the feasibility of a large-scale research project. Because pilots are preliminary and small in scale, the analyses that can be performed with the data generated by them, and any substantive conclusions derived from analyses conducted using pilot study data, are limited. The findings reported here for the Phase I Pilot are no exception, and are subject to these limitations.

### Moving Forward

This article presented only select findings from the Phase I Pilot. Results for most of the measures in the survey were not included. A partial listing of the other items included in the Phase I Pilot survey instrument includes:

- Time of day/night police–public contacts occurred;
- Respondent injury as a result of police use of force;
- Arrests, citations, and other outcomes of police–public contacts;
- Citizen resistance/non-compliance with police directives;
- Number of officers present during police–public contacts;
- Citizen perceptions of the quality of treatment received;
- Police officer race/ethnicity; and,
- Respondent demographic characteristics.

**Figure 4. Searches of Persons and Vehicles by Type of Official Police Contact, 2013**



With the completion of a full-scale, Alaska-wide survey, more comprehensive and detailed analyses will be performed, and the results will be disseminated in future *Alaska Justice Forum* articles, AJSAC publications, presentations, as well as other outlets. The intent of this description of the Phase I Pilot and brief presentation of results is to inform *Forum* readers of the AJSAC's efforts to establish a statewide police–public contact survey, and to demonstrate the utility of such an undertaking.

In spring 2014, the AJSAC conducted a Phase II Pilot study which had university students test a secure, online version of the survey to assess the feasibility of using that mode of administration to collect/compile the same information. The AJSAC is currently working on an analysis of the Phase II pilot results, and findings will be forthcoming.

A Phase III Pilot will be conducted that brings together the methodological findings of the Phase I and Phase II studies in the form of a multi-mode survey utilizing both paper and online options for respondents. A multi-mode survey would provide respondents with the ability to share information about their face-to-face contacts with police using *either* a paper, mail-based *or* a secure, Internet-based questionnaire that would be accessible via computer, tablet, or smart phone.

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